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**REVIEW ARTICLE**  
**MATERIALITY AND CLASSICS: (RE-)TURNING TO THE MATERIAL**

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**Abstract:** In this article I review eleven books published since 2010 that bring the ‘material turn’ to Classics. Some start from emic ancient perspectives on matter and materiality; others take their cue from current theoretical models such as those of the new materialisms. All offer new insights into our relationship with the material world, and consider the material object as active within different paradigms. In reviewing these important volumes together, I question entrenched boundaries: from those between (sub-)disciplines to those between human and nonhuman agents. I explore the material turn not as an isolated phenomenon, but first, as a cyclical ‘re’-turn, and secondly, as an integrated set of ideas incorporating (to name but a few strands) aesthetics, cognitive humanities, embodiment, affect, and the senses. The books reviewed range from literary studies to archaeology to art history to material culture to heritage. Taken together, they set new directions for Classics, and indeed for our thinking about our place in the world.

**Keywords:** materiality, material turn, boundaries, agency, aesthetics, embodiment, senses, affect, heritage.

BASSI (K.) **Traces of the Past: Classics between History and Archaeology**, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Pp. 256. \$70. 9780472119929.

BIELFELDT (R.) *Ed. Ding und Mensch in der Antike: Gegenwart und Vergegenwärtigung*, Akademiekonferenzen XVI, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2014. Pp. 377. €58. 9783825362744.

DRAYCOTT (J.) *Ed. Prostheses in Antiquity*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2018. Pp. 214. \$140. 9781472488091.

GAIFMAN (M.), PLATT (V.) and SQUIRE (M.) *Eds The Embodied Object in Greek and Roman Art*, special edition of *Art History*, 2018.

GOLDHILL (S.) **The Buried Life of Things: How Objects Made History in Nineteenth-Century Britain**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. ix + 259. £35.99. 9781107087484.

HARICH-SCHWARZBAUER (H.) *Ed. Weben und Gewebe in der Antike: Materialität – Repräsentation – Episteme – Metapoetik / Texts and Textiles in the Ancient World: Materiality – Representation – Episteme – Metapoetics*, Oxford and Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2015. Pp. 192. £38. 9781785700620.

MUELLER (M.) **Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy**, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. Pp. 272. \$55. 9780226312958.

PETROVIC (A.), PETROVIC (I.) and THOMAS (E.) *Eds The Materiality of Text: Placement, Perception, and Presence of Inscribed Texts in Classical Antiquity*, Leiden: Brill, 2019. Pp. xviii + 416. €118 9789004375505.

PORTER (J.) **The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xvii + 677. £85. 9780521841801.

TELÒ (M.) and MUELLER (M.) *Eds The Materialities of Greek Tragedy: Objects and Affect in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. 320. \$115. 9781350028791.

VAN OYEN (A.) and PITTS (M.) *Eds Materialising Roman Histories*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017. Pp. 232. £40. 9781785706769.

## I. Introduction: why materiality matters

In his 2003 article 'The Materiality of Classical Studies', James Porter raised 'the problem of materiality, which has a gamut of associations that are specific – and let's face it: *peculiar* – to the disciplines of Classics, standing as they uniquely do in relation to the material past of Greco-Roman antiquity and athwart the contemporary, modern (or postmodern) present.'<sup>1</sup> Though materiality – material remains, material culture, material fascination even – is at the core of Classics in all its areas, this fact has (Porter argues) variously been resisted, suppressed and disputed. As Porter summarises: '*Classics is as much a matter of matter as it is fundamentally a repression of this fact.*'<sup>2</sup> Porter writes of a 'queasy relation' between the disciplines and their materials or materialisations, often resulting in the avoidance of objects or the partial treatment of them. 'Perhaps luckily so', he continues: 'that is why we continually rediscover them, or aspects of them, with every new approach we take to the past.'<sup>3</sup> This discussion situates the current survey, as it raises two central points: the fundamental importance of materiality to all aspects of Classical study – and its cyclical neglect and re-emergence. I use the word 'cyclical' because this tendency of materiality to move in and out of focus is essential to our understanding of the material turn.<sup>4</sup> In his 2004 edited volume *Things*, Bill Brown, proponent of 'Thing Theory', considers the cyclical modishness of 'things' as an academic and artistic subject. Brown concentrates on the twentieth century which, he suggests, had a 'thing about things'.<sup>5</sup> But he does not claim that this mode came out of nowhere, or that there is something unique about the twentieth century. Rather, it is one in a series of material 'moments', a resurgence of interest in materiality, and a new manifestation of it. It is the continual rediscovery to which Porter refers: the way in which we bring new approaches to bear, again and again, on the material. This is particularly important to keep in mind when we move to consider the so-called 'New Materialisms' – not set up in antithesis to 'old' materialisms (e.g. historical materialism; Marxist-inspired materialism), but as an undercurrent now brought to the fore.

The 'material turn' is, then, both a turning towards the material and ontological, away from a postmodern emphasis on the discursive and epistemological, and a moment in which the material takes its turn. It is not that the material has never been there, nor that it has never been considered; but there is now a concentrated interest in materiality. This focus has the potential to shape not only our scholarly trajectory but also our relationship to the world around us, with shifts stretching from the methodological (moving beyond models of signification, to questions of what things *do*) to the classificatory (broadening the range of what things *are*); from the thematic (a wave of books with objects as their subjects) to the disciplinary (letting materiality drive our work, rather than disciplinary demarcations); from the relational (questioning boundaries, particularly that between human and nonhuman) to the ethical (raising up the status of the material).<sup>6</sup> Rooted in Continental philosophy, the material turn has swept across a vast number of disciplines, constituting a fundamental paradigm shift.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Porter (2003) 67.

<sup>2</sup> Porter (2003) 65, original italics.

<sup>3</sup> Porter (2003) 72.

<sup>4</sup> This can be paralleled in the discipline more widely: Settis (2004), concentrating on art and material remains, identifies its cyclical re-emergence as distinctive of the Classical tradition.

<sup>5</sup> Blackwell (2007) revisits Brown's assertion, giving a very similar account for the eighteenth century.

<sup>6</sup> The ethical stance is most evident in vital or vibrant materialism. As Jane Bennett writes in an article of 2012, what is at stake in the turn to things in contemporary theory is 'how it might help us live more sustainably, with less violence toward a variety of bodies. Poetry [the focus of her article] can help us feel more of the liveliness hidden in such things and reveal more of the threads of connection binding our fate to theirs.' As Serenella Iovino puts it in her article 'Steps to a Material Ecocriticism', a particular branch of material studies, 'The narcissism of our species is both material and discursive: humans, in fact, are not only in charge of the world but also of the word. The counter-story that a vibrant materialism hands to ecocriticism is an exercise in "listening"'. It has an urgency to it, with for instance the influx of New Materialisms being attributed to 'the emergence of pressing ethical and political concerns that accompany the scientific and technological advances predicated on new scientific models of matter' (Coole and Frost 2010, 5).

<sup>7</sup> Hicks and Beaudry (2010) sets out many of the questions central to the material turn. Chapter titles such as 'Material Culture and the Dance of Agency', 'Materiality and Embodiment' or 'The Malice of Inanimate Objects: Material Agency' are indicative. Also useful is Tilley *et al.* (2006).

It brings with it and takes under its umbrella also other ‘turns’ – the performative turn, the affective turn, the sensorial turn, the environmental turn, to name just a few –, making it rich, complex and multifaceted. But there are some essentials that underpin the material turn as a whole. A sustained interest in material and materiality: not solely in relational or instrumental terms, but in its own right. That is, an interest in material as separate from and, indeed, acting upon the human. An interest in boundaries and often the questioning or blurring of them: between people and things; the human and non-human; nature and culture; body and world. And an interest in agency: what constitutes material agency? This final point is perhaps the most contested and debated, and is arguably the key question that keeps the material turn turning.

But returning to Classics, Porter makes a suggestion. ‘What is really needed would be nothing short of an archaeology of attitudes to materialism, in all of its (and their) forms, not because materiality in the widest sense ... is a neglected component of the classical heritage (which it is), but because materiality is a constitutive factor – both a source of fascination and a source of resistance – in the conflicted attitudes that continue to shape our study of the Greco-Roman past’ (73). Paula Findlen, too, in *Early Modern Things* (2013), sets out an agenda, specifically for the relationship between literary studies and material culture: ‘We need to understand better how to consider literary sources as a record of material culture that goes beyond the history of the book, or the occasional quotation deployed to illustrate how materialism became a literary preoccupation that might rehearse on stage the anxieties and passions invoked by a world of things.’<sup>8</sup> I am convinced by both drives. In this review article I set out a number of publications that have made great strides in this direction, from multiple starting points.

## II. Boundaries I: interdisciplinarity

Consideration of materiality is inevitably and inextricably tied up with the notion of boundaries. Boundaries between disciplines; boundaries between people and things; boundaries between the discursive and the material. Porter’s ‘queasy relation’ between the disciplines that make up Classics can be treated: through a renewed focus on materiality that allows us to cross (sub-)disciplinary boundaries.

In her 2016 book *Traces of the Past*, Karen Bassi aims ‘to bridge the disciplinary divide that separates archaeologists, historians, and philologists’ (1), opening up a dialogue between classicists who study literary texts and those who study material or visual sources. Uniting the three disciplines, Bassi argues, is their confrontation with the past as something that is no longer or only partially visible, and the book traces this confrontation and its consequences in the Greek narrative tradition (16). A key player in this venture is what Bassi terms *protoarchaeological narrative*: ‘narratives in which the past is constituted out of or in response to what is visible (or not) in the present’ (2). Bassi concludes that the past ‘is produced not in the unbridgeable gap between empirical observation and linguistic representation but in their dialogic interplay’ (201). The book spans the archaic and classical periods, mythological and historical time, and oral and literary genres, and Bassi seeks ‘to show how the promise of seeing the past transcends these conventional categories’ (17). Perhaps the most challenging object of Bassi’s study is the Achaean wall (Chapter 2): star of a disappearing trick that has forever vexed Homer’s audiences. In *Iliad* 7 the Achaeans, at Nestor’s suggestion, build a grave mound with high towers, gates, and a ditch. Poseidon is worried that the fame of this wall will outshine that of the wall he and Apollo built, so Zeus advises him to destroy it: which in *Iliad* 12 we are told that, after the war, he does. Bassi uses this elusive item to reflect on ‘the temporal, epistemological, and ontological categories that define protoarchaeological narratives’ (18), and draws connections from the wall to wider themes such as heroic *kleos* and the relationship between *historia* and *poiêsis*. The wall’s disappearance (in)famously takes place in a hypothetical past, confusing the issue even further, and Bassi harnesses this temporal anomaly in support of her argument that ‘the past constitutes a receding visual field in the Greek narrative tradition’ (41).

Bassi’s book teaches a valuable lesson. Rather than being confined by disciplinary boundaries in our work, and by the tools traditionally associated with those disciplines, we might consider accessing the classical world through a focus on materiality: a focus that can take us from archaeological theory to the philosophy of history, from literary theory to heritage studies, from text to artefact and back again. According to Bassi, the question we should be asking ourselves is not how objects and texts are similar or different, nor which is the chicken and which the egg – but ‘why the distinctions between

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<sup>8</sup> Findlen (2013) 14.

objects and texts, including the disciplinary investment in those distinctions, have been formulated' (201).

The second book takes us back to Porter, this time his 2010 *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece* in which he proffers 'Aesthetics' as a unifying mode of inquiry. At the root of his discussion is matter, as 'The belief in matter as a constituent of experience and reality was strongly rooted in Greek thought, but also highly contested' (3). Porter sets out the emergence of Greek concepts of matter and materiality, as well as their antitheses: the counter-concepts of form and the immaterial. Further ahead in this review article, I will move to consider modern thing theories and their application to the ancient world. It is important, however, to begin our exploration of materiality with a book that tackles head-on what matter meant to the ancients, how it was comprehended, experienced and, indeed, theorised. Porter's book shows how antiquity gives us emic conceptions of materialist thought (that is, conceptions from within ancient culture) – which we can then link up with the current material turn. Porter's book also ties in with other turns related to the material, and that will come up again in this review piece: most notably, the senses and the sensorial turn,<sup>9</sup> as Porter considers 'the roles played by touch and sight, the mutual evocation of sensory experiences (synaesthesia), the vivacity of sensation' (3). Porter's work also ties into the theme of material agency (to which I come later), as he presents aesthetics in terms of what things do to people. The main aim of this book is to revive the neglected aspects of a Greek aesthetics of matter founded on sensuous apprehension – to bring materiality to the fore. This, combined with the all-encompassing notion of aesthetics that reaches beyond disciplinary boundaries, makes Porter's book the ideal companion in our turn to the material.

### III. The matter of texts

In his introduction to the edited volume *The Materiality of Text: Placement, Perception, and Presence of Inscribed Texts in Classical Antiquity*, Andrej Petrovic notes that 'in all literate societies textuality is predicated on materiality' (4). In a footnote he goes even further: 'In the case of oral traditions and "oral texts," this may extend to include sound as matter' (a suggestion that, again, links the material and sensory turns).<sup>10</sup> The ring-fencing of 'material culture' is broken down with the realisation that materiality underpins all of our textual evidence too, and as such is at the heart of every branch of classical study. This book offers a comprehensive survey of themes, covering epigraphic, literary and architectural spaces – though it is simultaneously demarcated by a focus on epigraphic texts, which drive all the contributions and continually bring us back to the physicality of the inscribed text. The introduction situates the volume within current debates, whilst also looking back to that emic perspective of the ancients. For instance, Petrovic draws connections between Latin *materia* and Greek *hylê*, both denoting building materials first and foremost, and puts Aristotle's hylomorphic theory 'in Heideggerian terms' (11): that is, the potentiality of things to take shape, the latent agency of the material. Etymologically speaking, Petrovic notes, materiality and text involve the same conceptual metaphors: those of weaving and entwining. Text comes from Latin *texo*, *-ere* 'to weave, construct'; matter from Indo-European *\*mat*, 'to entwine, twist, interweave' (9-10). There is thus an affinity between them, as they intertwine.<sup>11</sup> This is elaborated, with variations on the theme, in Henriette Harich-Schwarzbauer's volume *Weben und Gewebe in der Antike: Materialität – Repräsentation – Episteme – Metapoetik*. It is only in a substantial book like this that we can even begin to get an idea of the complexity and pervasiveness of the associations between text and textile, from the conceptual to the practical. To give just a few examples: Gunther Martin traces the weaving motif in Euripides' *Ion*, connecting weaving with truth and its gradual unfolding;<sup>12</sup> Simon Zuenelli and Cédric Scheidegger Lämmle both explore stories of *failure* at the loom, and what this might mean for the metaphorical connections; and Felicitas Maeder and Beate Wagner-Hasel discuss, respectively, the history of mussel silk and the use of wool as a mark of distinction. Many of the chapters integrate a labour perspective, bringing out the full assemblage that lies behind created objects by highlighting their creators and the contexts of their creation. And materiality and text are not the only terminologies that are explored in

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<sup>9</sup> See in particular Routledge's 'The Senses in Antiquity' book series, edited by Mark Bradley and Shane Butler.

<sup>10</sup> In Petrovic, Petrovic and Thomas (2019) 4 note 8.

<sup>11</sup> Petrovic draws our attention to *Materiale Textkulturen*: a large-scale collaborative research project based at Heidelberg University, which brings together the two aspects.

<sup>12</sup> On objects in the *Ion* see also Mueller (2010), and Estrin in Telò and Mueller (2018) (see below).

tandem. Marie-Louise Nosch in her chapter ‘The loom and the ship in ancient Greece’ uses tenets of cognitive archaeology to argue that the conception and development of these two technologies have much in common. This is a rich tapestry of a book, to which its brief introduction does not quite do justice.

Returning to *The Materiality of Text*, the chapters combine to engage with current thinking on matter as active: ‘to conceive of materiality with its latent or realized agency in mind’ (11). Drawing on the work of Tim Ingold (amongst others), the work’s authors cast materials and texts not only as existing in time, but as defining or embodying it (12). Case studies particularly in the ‘architectural spaces’ section of the volume bring out the ways in which ‘an object was perceived to have an independent voice’. That this is about *perception* gives us an insight into the relationship between people and things as it was experienced, or at least framed, in the ancient world. Such reflections lead us to our next boundary.

#### **IV. Boundaries II: person and thing**

Ruth Bielfeldt’s edited volume *Ding und Mensch in der Antike* takes us explicitly to what is another contested boundary: that between person and thing. This dichotomy (and the questioning of it) is at the centre of the new materialisms, which I shall set out in more detail in the next section. The relationship between people and things drives this collection, which begins from the modern viewpoint of current thing theories and phenomenologies, and investigates their use and indeed their roots in (the study of) classical antiquity. This is another interdisciplinary contribution, with a primary focus on classical archaeology but including chapters also on epic, tragedy, philosophy – even subject-object relations in the medieval Christian world. The two chapters by Bielfeldt herself are exemplary. In the first, ‘Gegenwart und Vergegenwärtigung: dynamische Dinge im Ausgang von Homer’ (15-48), Bielfeldt describes a Homeric worldview in which humans and objects are both beings with intentions.<sup>13</sup> She identifies a number of forms of agency that pertain to things as much as to people: independent movement, mimetic vividness, *enargeia*, and aesthetic presence. Such agency she finds in, for instance, the automata in Hephaestus’ forge, or the weapons that ‘leap’ or ‘desire’ or ‘strive’.<sup>14</sup> These are pioneering claims which make a real difference to how we conceptualise the relationship between the human and nonhuman in approaching ancient sources. Bielfeldt’s second chapter, ‘Lichtblicke – Sehstrahlen. Zur Präsenz römischer Figuren- und Bildlampen’ (195-238) spans archaeology, art history and cultural history, and gives a concrete example of a paradigm shift in operation. In Bielfeldt’s discussion, Roman figural lamps ‘presence’ their decorations, usually of a divine nature; they enact a narrative; and they have an agency. The lamps, eye-catching light sources, become the viewers, eyes that are watching.<sup>15</sup> The boundary between person and thing, even between the divine, human and nonhuman spheres, is blurred.<sup>16</sup>

The boundary between person and thing is again probed in Jane Draycott’s edited volume *Prostheses in Antiquity*. Prostheses have been a topic of interest for scholars concerned with both materiality and distributed cognition: a perfect focus for questions about the mind, body and material world, and where the divisions might lie. Using literary, documentary and (bio-)archaeological evidence, this book takes the material turn, and in particular the issue of boundaries, into other areas, such as ancient medicine and disability in antiquity. Plus, the topic provides an opportunity to think through both the material and the discursive. Whilst chapters such as ‘The design of working models of two ancient Egyptian great toe prostheses’ and ‘Etruscan dental appliances’ employ archaeological evidence to examine real prostheses and their functionality, chapters like that by Anne-Sophie Noel on ‘Prosthetic imagination in Greek literature’ explore ‘the ways in which “the prosthetic” may be used as

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<sup>13</sup> On the blurred boundary between person and thing in Homer, see also Purves (2015) and Mueller (2016). For a full discussion of objects and agency in Homer, see Canevaro (2018).

<sup>14</sup> On Hephaestus’ material creations and their position on a spectrum of vitality, see Canevaro (2018) 220-2. For Homer’s lively weapons see e.g. *Il.* 11.574, 15.542-43.

<sup>15</sup> This chapter is connected with another, Bielfeldt (2015). This appeared in the book *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, edited by Michael Squire, and as such exemplifies the crossovers between the material and sensorial turn. See further Bielfeldt in Gaifman, Platt and Squire (2018), discussed below.

<sup>16</sup> For the convergence of materiality and religion, we might look to the Baron Thyssen Centre for the Study of Ancient Material Religion, founded at the Open University in 2018: <https://www.openmaterialreligion.org>.

a metaphor to think about the boundaries between objects and bodies' (159). Noel takes us back to what she identifies as the first mention of prosthesis in classical literature: the ivory shoulder of Pelops in Pindar's *Olympian* 1. She argues for a symbiosis of body and prosthetic material that mirrors the hybridity of hero and weapon identified in Homeric epic and on the tragic stage.<sup>17</sup> The boundaries of the body are probed, and are found permeable – not only in the way we behave, but also in the way we imagine behaviour.

## V. New materialities

The new materialisms have been gaining ground in disciplines from philosophy to sociology, art to archaeology, since their development in the 1990s. As Melissa Mueller and Mario Telò put it in the introduction to their 2018 volume *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy*: 'What distinguishes the new materialisms from traditional materialisms (Marxian, Freudian) is the post-humanist foundation of their hermeneutic, ethical, and political concerns, that is, their questioning of anthropocentrism, of the primacy of the human subject' (2). New materialism is essentially a body of post-humanist cultural theory that radically rethinks Cartesian dualisms such as nature/culture, matter/mind, human/nonhuman. The new materialisms are beginning to make waves in Classical Studies, thanks in large part to this volume's editors. Mueller's 2016 book *Objects as Actors: Props and the Poetics of Performance in Greek Tragedy* introduces a new approach to Athenian tragic plays, focusing on the importance of objects in their staging and reception, and showing how props demand attention and participate as agents of tragic action. Mueller gives a strikingly integrated picture of material agency within and across productions, exploring 'the recycling and repurposing of material elements' and setting a new agenda for the study of intertextuality that does not privilege verbal allusion over visual and material modes of communication. She argues for an 'intertextual spectatorship' (3): an ancient audience highly sensitised to the material aspects of tragic performance (costume, prop, setting). Take, for example, the purple tapestry of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, whose distinctive materiality is 'etched into the repertoire, creating a dynamic and complex nexus of sartorial allusions between the *Oresteia* and the later *Electra* plays of Sophocles and Euripides' (3). And Telò's 2016 book *Aristophanes and the Cloak of Comedy* is part of the affective turn in the humanities, 'a new conception of the materiality of emotions' (2) that converges with the ontological reorientation offered by the new materialisms. This edited volume, then, stems from that meeting point of the editors' research areas, and showcases the innovative work being done in this burgeoning field.

Bruno Latour (known for Actor Network Theory) notes that 'Novels, plays, and films from classical tragedy to comics provide a vast playground to rehearse accounts of what makes us act'.<sup>18</sup> And Bill Brown begins his 2015 book *Other Things* with a discussion of the Shield of Achilles (*Iliad* 18). Brown notes that though the Shield has long been at the centre of rhetorical analyses, its role in the history of animate matter has been ignored. He refocuses our attention to the materiality of the Shield, suggesting that it insists 'on a kind of indeterminate ontology, in which the being of the object world cannot so readily be distinguished from the being of animals, say, or the being we call human being.'<sup>19</sup> These are examples of new-materialist theory borrowing from classical literary study – and Mueller and Telò's volume brings the argument full circle, feeding back from Classics into the theoretical debate. A strength of the volume is that the contributors take an active critical and evaluative approach to the new materialisms, never importing the theory wholesale but sifting through it, trying out test cases, uncovering the potential and the blind spots.

Though both editors specialise in literature, and the book's title *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy* leads us in the direction of one particular literary genre, there are a number of chapters that bring together literature and material culture. For instance, Seth Estrin starts from the material objects of Euripides' *Ion*, giving weight not only to those literary accounts of real-world things often treated as 'accurate', but in particular to the more often ignored or suspected descriptions, such as those of Creusa's visions. Estrin maps out an affective pull of the play that draws on 'strategies of image recognition that infused real-life interaction with material objects and works of art' (132), drawing the audience in. The analysis of *Ion* alongside sculpted funerary monuments – their relics and epigrams –

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<sup>17</sup> See, again, Purves (2015) and Mueller (2016).

<sup>18</sup> Latour (2005) 54-55.

<sup>19</sup> Brown (2015) 2.

offers a case study in reading objects in and out of texts, bringing literary study and art history into dialogue through things real and imagined.

This book introduces many related fields and in doing so shows how multi-faceted is the material turn. As well as affect, there is a strong crossover with sensory studies. Naomi Weiss in her chapter 'Speaking sights and seen sounds' focuses on the visual dimensions of Aeschylus' plays. From the sound of an army to a beacon of light, Weiss offers an expansive catalogue of agents.<sup>20</sup> She considers Aeschylus' innovative use of physical space, exploring the real and imaginary dimensions of *opsis* and showing how 'Aeschylus was constantly experimenting with blurring the line between the material and immaterial' (170). This chapter is complemented by Nancy Worman's 'Electra, Orestes, and the Sibling Hand', which explores Sophocles' *Electra* and Euripides' *Electra* and *Orestes* with a focus on one sense in particular – touch – and more specifically on one locus of haptic contact – the hand – but approaches it as 'whole-body or multi-sensory experiencing' (185). Worman's attentive and detailed analysis uncovers a sort of 'extreme proxemics' (186), in which proximity between humans and between humans and things is pushed so far as to become a merging of agents.<sup>21</sup>

The 'sensory' chapters also connect up with the cognitive humanities, particularly work on distributed or extended cognition. Anna Uhlig discusses Sophocles' *Ichneutae* and how 'The satyrs are, in a sense, transformed into dogs before the audience's eyes' (155): a fascinating spectacle, especially when considered in terms of the boundaries the new materialisms probe (human/animal; person/thing; inside/outside; self/other). Uhlig unpacks the term 'body', grounding her discussion in Latour's work on affective relationships. She uses Latour's concept of affective engagement to note that the satyrs' tracking with their dog-like noses effectively reshapes and extends the boundaries of the body. Similarly, Al Duncan's chapter examines the tragic mask as both passive object and active thing. By arguing that the mask 'actively and independently embodied performance' (81), Duncan takes us beyond models of signification, to the direct action and affect of the material. This chapter engages with cognitively inflected studies of the mask,<sup>22</sup> showcasing a way in which the new materialisms can complement cognitive readings. In following 'the vital force of masks across their entire material lives' (81), Duncan convincingly shows that the mask has meaning not only when part of a cognitive framework (face, body, movement, etc.), but also when 'disembodied' (84).

Disembodiment leads on to another paradigm in the study of ancient materiality: that of embodiment.<sup>23</sup> For this, I move to the 2018 special edition of *Art History*, on 'The Embodied Object in Greek and Roman Art'. Though focused on classical art history, it incorporates areas such as cognitive archaeology, material culture studies, Actor Network Theory, and phenomenological approaches. The term 'embodied object' is used to describe artefacts which interact with, extend, substitute or incorporate human bodies – and in this way it links up with many of the volumes I have discussed so far, particularly certain chapters in *The Materialities of Greek Tragedy* and those of *Prostheses in Antiquity*. The introduction by two of the editors, Milette Gaifman and Verity Platt, is particularly useful in summarising the state of play in classical art history. They note that although the dynamic life of objects has been the subject of much discussion in recent decades (building, most of all, on Gell 1998), it is only with more recent publications (Bielfeldt 2014 is cited as the key example) that 'the influences of ANT, Bill Brown's "Thing Theory", or the forces of neo-materialism have made their presence more tangible within the study of ancient visual culture' (406). The special journal issue draws on these developments – and, explicitly, on 'a major intervention in the field of ancient aesthetics spearheaded by James Porter' (407). In this exploration of the embodied object, many of the strands we have already discussed come together, with compelling results.

Gaifman and Platt point out that 'hands constitute a critical site of engagement between human bodies and the worlds that they inhabit. A locus of sensation, creation, communication and collaboration, they are arguably as vital as the eye when considering dynamic relations between persons

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<sup>20</sup> Nooter (2017) 128-34 also has an extensive reading of the beacon speech from the opening of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. It is another study that combines the material and sensorial, as it considers the materiality of sound.

<sup>21</sup> Worman's book *Edges of the Human: Embodiment and Materiality in Greek Tragedy* is in progress, and will be an important addition to the field.

<sup>22</sup> See Meineck (2018).

<sup>23</sup> For a key study see Smith (2017), in particular Brooke Holmes' chapter 'The body of western embodiment: classical antiquity and the early history of a problem'.



and things' (404). This recalls Nancy Worman's 'Sibling Hand' chapter in Mueller and Telò 2018 mentioned above, as well as works more firmly situated in sensory studies on haptic experience.<sup>24</sup> Further, it identifies a particularly porous boundary site: a point at which the line between person and thing is permeable. This takes on a compelling dynamism in an art-historical context: makers' hands; handlers; handles. Gaifman, in her chapter 'The Greek libation bowl as embodied object', considers *phialai* as extensions or prostheses of the ritual actor's body. Held in the hand, these objects show the capacity of things and people to work together as socio-material assemblages. Gaifman and Platt describe a young woman emerging from the handle of an Argive hydria, with *phialai* in place of her palms. 'Acting as both representation of a ritual actor (a performer of libations) and functional component of the vessel (designed to perform a specific role in the pouring of water)' (403), the vessel and its handler turn out to be mutually constitutive. Similarly, Ruth Bielfeldt's chapter returns to lamps (this time a Roman candelabra), their active agency and the affective relationships they establish with their human owners.

In their introduction, Gaifman and Platt, like Porter in his book *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece*, bring modern theory into dialogue with emic perspectives from classical antiquity. 'From the beginnings of Greek culture,' they note, "'embodied objects" formed part of the imaginative terrain pertaining to the master-craftsman': from Hephaetus' automata and the statues of Daedalus, to the 'speaking' statue of Phrasikleia; from the slave as 'a reified and instrumentalized human', to female bodies as 'instruments of pleasure, reproduction or matrimonial exchange' (414).<sup>25</sup> Thus, there is a slippage in ancient thought between person and thing, complicating binaries and consequently any straightforward division of agency or subjectivity.

## VI. Material Agency

In their 2017 volume *Materialising Roman Histories*, editors Astrid Van Oyen and Martin Pitts argue that focusing on what objects *did* provides a fuller theoretical framework of how material culture works. This view is taken up by many of the volume's contributors, in particular Eva Mohl in her chapter 'Object ontology and cultural taxonomies: Examining the agency of style, material and objects in classification through Egyptian material culture in Pompeii and Rome', and Miguel John Versluys in his 'Discussion. Object-scapes. Towards a material constitution of Romaness?'<sup>26</sup> Though this collection falls outside the primary Hellenic focus of my review, it needs to be included as one of the key works within the study of material culture that gives full weight to material agency. This is something in which Versluys is particularly well versed, being one of the convenors of Leiden University's Material Agency Forum, an interdisciplinary enterprise between Archaeology, Anthropology, and Art History.<sup>27</sup> He argues that 'History evolves through the particular relationship between objects and people. The configurations we call society and history are a mix of human beings with objects, in which both people and things have some sort of agency and influence each other' (191). In terms of focusing on what objects *do*, Versluys observes that 'things are not determined by their logical relations within a classification scheme but by their working relations with other things and humans in their environment' (195).<sup>28</sup> He is concerned with objects as participants in a network, a working relation, and this fleshes out the theoretical picture for the study of material culture. Similarly, Mohl argues that some objects *move* us (intentional) but all objects *shape* us (unintentional). She defines agency as 'the power that style or objects have to affect human intentions and behaviour' (169).

Versluys discusses 'the fundamental role of objects in shaping human behaviour' – and refers to the work of Simon Goldhill on nineteenth-century material culture. It is to Goldhill's book *The Buried*

<sup>24</sup> See in particular Platt and Squire (2018).

<sup>25</sup> On objects, gender and agency, see Holmes (2012) and Canevaro (2018).

<sup>26</sup> Versluys defines an 'object-scape' as 'the repertoire(s) of material culture available at a certain site in a certain period in terms of their material and stylistic characteristics'. (197)

<sup>27</sup> The convenors have published their intellectual agenda in a positioning paper: see Van Eck, Ter Keurs and Versluys (2015).

<sup>28</sup> Consideration of environment evokes yet another strand of materiality studies, that of Material Ecocriticism (see Iovino and Oppermann 2014), in which 'the environment' is seen not as a static backdrop but as an active agent within a network. Material Ecocriticism may prove a particularly useful approach for studying literature, as it sees human agency meeting the narrative agency of matter halfway (term from Barad 2007), generating material-discursive phenomena such as literature (and literary criticism).

*Life of Things* that I turn in conclusion. This book works through the material turn in what we might label variously the Classical Tradition, Classical Reception, or Heritage Studies, exploring ways in which material culture was used in Victorian Britain to connect the contemporary age of progress with the (biblical and) classical past. It draws on texts of different kinds (novels, poems, graffiti, inscriptions), as well as art, architecture, archaeology, clothing, technologies – ‘the full gamut of verbal and material culture’ (7). With this book we revisit the cyclical nature of our ‘thing about things’, as in the opening pages Goldhill conjures up the Victorian drawing room, ‘an immediately recognizable stereotype of the profusion of things’ (1): ‘One universally acknowledged truth about the Victorians is that they loved their things’ (2). Goldhill is interested in objects that *embody* history, and that consequently become foci of controversy. He approaches material agency in terms of what he calls processes of objectification: ‘how objects become treated as if their meaning were not the construction of human interactions’ (6). Particularly fascinating about this book is its presentation of another kind of cyclicity: that within a single object and its life cycle. ‘Things excite and lose contested meanings, flare into significance and fall into forgottenness, perform an assertive theological intent, and become the focus of suspicious anxiety—and, at best, end in the safe preservation of heritage, behind glass.’ (63).<sup>29</sup> Goldhill notes that ‘Things, things in and as history, are less solid, more fragile than the long history of the rhetoric of material permanence would have us credit... Things take on cultural authority because they can be taken to express value, ideology, history; things can lose their authority because this invisible, soft power is not integral to them.’ (194-5). The book’s important message is that ‘The relationship between the materiality of history and the stories of history turns out to be remarkably unstable and fractious’ (3). In the current theoretical climate, with new-materialist paradigms elevating the object and its agency, this book grounds us, encouraging us to reflect not only on the entanglements between people and things across time,<sup>30</sup> but also on the fact that the entanglement between object and cultural referent is not immutable. Materiality persists – but its resonance changes. When approaching materiality in and through the ancient world, we would do well to keep both the ‘materiality of history’ and the ‘stories of history’ in our analytical toolkit, remaining open to the multiple and dynamic entanglements between person, thing – and narrative.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This connects with Boscagli (2014), in which she describes a process undergone by objects, from valued possessions to waste, with a ‘stuff’ stage in between (when objects are not necessarily noticed, but not yet disposable). A similar approach is that of Orlando (2015), who explores the theme of ‘oggetti desueti’ – useless, old, unusual, or non-functional objects – in twelve twentieth-century romances.

<sup>30</sup> On entanglement, see especially Hodder (2012) (archaeology). Other (more or less) synonymous terms used in the theoretical literature are: assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett); network (Latour); meshwork (Ingold); phenomenon (Barad).

<sup>31</sup> This is explored in a forthcoming article by Grethlein on ‘Odysseus and his bed: from significant objects to thing theory’, in terms of Homeric objects and their material agency.

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